



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

REGION 5

77 WEST JACKSON BOULEVARD

CHICAGO, IL 60604-3590

AUG 17 2009

REPLY TO THE ATTENTION OF:

E-19J

Jennifer Maziasz
Washburn Ranger District
Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest
113 East Bayfield Street
Washburn, Wisconsin 54891

Re: Northwest Sands Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Washburn Ranger Districts,
Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, Bayfield County, Wisconsin
CEQ No. 20090221

Dear Ms. Maziasz:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has reviewed the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the above-mentioned project. Our review is pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act, the Council on Environmental Quality's NEPA Implementing Regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508), and Section 309 of the Clean Air Act.

The main goal of the proposed project is to restore the pine barrens ecosystem, of which only 1 percent remains on the landscape. Proposed management activities are designed to address differences between desired future conditions as stated in the 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) and current conditions found in the project area. Project objectives include the following:

- Restore vegetation species composition and structure that once existed under a natural disturbance regime;
- Restore small, open areas and "pocket barrens" as a component of the overall landscape;
- Improve habitat for wildlife species dependent on the pine barrens ecosystem;
- Re-establish fire; and
- Provide a transportation system that meets long-term transportation needs.

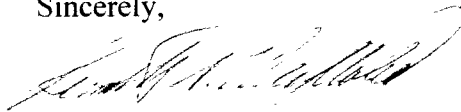
The Draft EIS documents analysis of a No Action alternative plus two action alternatives. The proposed action, Alternative 2, was developed to meet as much of the purpose and need as possible. Alternative 3 was developed to address the concern raised during scoping regarding the size of the open lands component. The concern was that the open barrens vegetation component (which is very open at <1 tree per acre) should be increased because it is the least common vegetation component in the greater Northwest Wisconsin pine barrens ecosystem and because it would improve habitat for wildlife species. The two alternatives differ based on how this issue is addressed; Alternative 3 would designate more acres to the open land component and manage those acres more intensively using prescribed fire and mechanical treatment.

The Draft EIS indicates that approximately 4,800 contiguous acres of suitable open habitat would be available following implementation of Alternative 2, and approximately 6,400 contiguous acres would be available following implementation of Alternative 3. Consolidation of suitable habitat would enhance habitat quality for sharp-tailed grouse. Even though both alternatives will increase the open barrens vegetation component, neither will produce the size of 10,000 acres of suitable habitat desired for genetic viability over the long-term, as recommended by the population viability analysis for sharp-tailed grouse. Please discuss in the Final EIS whether the USFS and/or other landowners contemplate future projects that might add to the amount of this type of habitat.

Based on our review of the Draft EIS, we have assigned a rating of "Lack of Objections" to this Draft EIS. A summary of the rating system used in the evaluation of this document is enclosed for your reference. We have no substantive comments on the proposed management activities; both action alternatives address the purpose and need and are consistent with the Forest Plan.

Please send one copy of the Final EIS and Record of Decision to my attention once it becomes available. Should you have any questions regarding the contents of this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me or Kathy Kowal at (312) 353-5206 or via email at kowal.kathleen@epa.gov.

Sincerely,



Kenneth A. Westlake
Supervisor, NEPA Implementation
Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance

Enclosure

cc: Jim McDonald, Regional Environmental Coordinator